

Young Girls and Eating Disorders

In the United States, conservative estimates indicate that after puberty, 5-10 million girls and women and 1 million boys and men are struggling with eating disorders including anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder, or borderline conditions. Eating disorders and distorted body image widely affect the American population. Because of the secretiveness and shame associated with eating disorders, many cases are probably not reported. In addition, many individuals struggle with body dissatisfaction and sub-clinical disordered eating attitudes and behaviors. For example, 80% of American women are dissatisfied with their appearance. Consider these alarming statistics:

- 42% of 1st-3rd grade girls want to be thinner.
- 81% of 10 year olds are afraid of being fat.
- The average American woman is 5'4" tall and weighs 140 pounds.
- The average American model is 5'11" tall and weighs 117 pounds - most fashion models are thinner than 98% of American women.

Anorexia Nervosa is a serious, potentially life-threatening eating disorder characterized by self-starvation and excessive weight loss. Approximately 90-95% of anorexia nervosa sufferers are girls and women. Between 1-2% of American women suffer from anorexia nervosa. Anorexia nervosa is one of the most common psychiatric diagnoses in young women. Between 5-20% of individuals struggling with anorexia nervosa will die. The probabilities of death increases within that range depending on the length of the condition. Anorexia nervosa has one of the highest death rates of any mental health condition and typically appears in early to mid-adolescence.

Anorexia Nervosa has five primary symptoms:

- Refusal to maintain body weight at or above a minimally normal weight for height, body type, age, and activity level.
- Intense fear of weight gain or being "fat."
- Feeling "fat" or overweight despite dramatic weight loss.
- Loss of menstrual periods in girls and women post-puberty.
- Extreme concern with body weight and shape.

Bulimia Nervosa is a serious, potentially life-threatening eating disorder characterized by a secretive cycle of bingeing and purging. Bulimia nervosa affects 1-3% of middle and high school girls and 1-4% of college age women. Approximately 80% of bulimia nervosa patients are female. People struggling with bulimia nervosa will often appear to be of average body weight. Often, people struggling with bulimia nervosa will develop complex schedules or rituals to provide opportunities for binge-and-purge sessions. Many people struggling with bulimia nervosa recognize that their behaviors are unusual and perhaps dangerous to their health.

Bulimia Nervosa has three primary symptoms:

- Eating large quantities of food in short periods of time, often secretly, without regard to feelings of "hunger" or "fullness," and to the point of feeling "out of control" while eating.
- Following these "binges" with some form of purging or compensatory behavior to make up for the excessive calories taken in: self-induced vomiting, laxative or diuretic abuse, fasting, and/or obsessive or compulsive exercise.
- Extreme concern with body weight and shape.

Source: National Eating Disorders Association

Missouri Women's Council

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Binge Eating Disorder is a newly recognized eating disorder characterized by frequent episodes of uncontrolled overeating. The prevalence of binge eating disorder in the general population is still being determined. Researchers estimate that approximately 25% of obese individuals suffer from frequent episodes of binge eating. Binge eating disorder affects women slightly more often than men--estimates indicate that about 60% of people struggling with binge eating disorder are female, 40% are male. People who struggle with binge eating disorder can be of normal or heavier than average weight. Many people who suffer from binge eating disorder have a history of depression. People struggling with binge eating disorder often express distress, shame, and guilt over their eating behaviors.

Binge Eating Disorder has several primary symptoms:

- Frequent episodes of eating large quantities of food in short periods of time often secretly, without regard to feelings of "hunger" or "fullness."
- Frequent feelings of being "out of control" during binges.
- Eating large quantities of food rapidly, without really tasting the food.
- Eating alone.
- Feelings of shame, disgust, or guilt after a binge.

What You Can Do to Help

- Learn as much as you can about eating disorders. Read books, articles, and brochures.
- Know the differences between facts and myths about weight, nutrition, and exercise. Knowing the facts will help you reason against any inaccurate ideas that your friend may be using as excuses to maintain her disordered eating patterns.
- Be honest. Talk openly and honestly about your concerns with the person who is struggling with eating or body image problems. Avoiding it or ignoring it won't help!
- Be caring, but be firm. Caring about your friend does not mean being manipulated by her. Your friend must be responsible for her actions and their consequences. Avoid making "rules," promises, or expectations that you cannot or will not uphold (For example, "I promise not to tell anyone." or, "If you do this one more time I'll never talk to you again.").
- Tell someone. It may seem difficult to know when, if at all, to tell someone else about your concerns. Addressing body image or eating problems in their beginning stages probably offers your friend the best chance for working through these issues and becoming healthy again. Don't wait until the situation is so severe that your friend's life is in danger. If you have already spoken with your friend and still feel like more steps need to be taken to address these issues, consider telling her parents, a teacher, a doctor, a counselor, a nutritionist, or any trusted adult. She needs as much support and understanding as possible from the people in her life.

You cannot force someone to seek help, change their habits, or adjust their attitudes. You will make important progress in honestly sharing your concerns, providing support, and knowing where to go for more information! People struggling with anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating disorder do need professional help. There is help available, and there is hope!

Treatment Referral Hotlines

Missouri

The Missouri Department of Mental Health

1-800-364-9687

Nationally

International Association of Eating Disorders Professionals

1-800-994-9662

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders

1-847-831-3438

National Eating Disorders Association

1-206-382-3587

American Anorexia Bulimia Association, Inc.

1-212-575-6200

Overeaters Anonymous

1-505-891-2664